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MAXWELL TAYLOR'S VISION: MILITARY STRATEGY OF "THE UNCERTAIN TRUMPET"

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MAXWELL TAYLOR'S VISION: MILITARY STRATEGY OF "THE UNCERTAIN TRUMPET"

General Maxwell Taylor's "The Uncertain Trumpet"¹ contains a well thought out, comprehensive military strategy for the nuclear age. It is extraordinary in its vision of ultimate nuclear parity and mutual deterrence. It uses logical arguments that, for the most part, hold true today. This paper provides a critical analysis of that military strategy.

THE ENVIRONMENT

The 14 years since the first use of atomic power had been turbulent. The world watched as the Soviets made impressive technological advances, including development of atomic and hydrogen bombs and associated delivery systems, and their Sputnik satellite. The Berlin blockade, the successes of communism in China and Cuba, the Korean war, and events in Eastern Europe provided ample evidence of Soviet aggressive intentions and of the likelihood of continued conflicts. And most unsettling of all was their apparent movement toward the US strategy of massive retaliation.

But pressures were mounting for containing the cost of the military, and many saw nuclear weaponry as a solution. The "New Look" idea of the 1950's was that preponderant air power would be used to deliver atomic weapons — and that the use of such weapons in future wars would be unrestricted. Many, especially Admiral Radford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advocated drastically cutting the Army, relegating it to the overseas role of

resistance to hostile ground attack using small atomic task forces, and to the domestic role of civil defense.

We should have learned from our Korean War experience that we can't rely on nuclear weapons because the practicality of politics precluded their use. We should have learned from the French experience at Dien Bien Phu that use of large nuclear weapons in a limited war was not feasible because any attack sufficient to defeat the aggressors also would seriously endanger the defenders. And we should have known that, eventually, our adversaries would have the capability to return massive retaliation in kind. It had become clear that limited war demanded a conventional response.

General Taylor points out that some writers of the 1950's, including Bernard Brodie, Liddell Hart, and George Kennan, among others, saw the ultimate impossibility of total war and forecast that only limited warfare could serve any useful purpose. In the late 1950's, no less influential a statesman than Secretary of State John Foster Dulles questioned the validity of massive retaliation. And the matter increasingly was the subject of debates in the media.²

In 1955 the National Security Council, having recognized that the world was moving toward a condition of mutual deterrence, concluded that the country needed versatile, ready forces to deal with limited aggression. The rationale was that the US wanted to avoid situations where it would either have to use nuclear weapons or give in to local aggression. I would argue that the same rationale

has applied for many years in the global arena. We have had to maintain a credible conventional deterrent to avoid being boxed into a choice between giving in or resorting to use of our nuclear deterrent. Had we ever found ourselves in such a predicament it would, of course, have meant that our deterrence had failed. But it also may have revealed our nuclear force to be useful only as a deterrent, and not as a tool of war. Thus I believe that since the day when we no longer had a nuclear monopoly (not just nuclear superiority, i.e., since the Soviets exploded their first atomic device in 1949) we have been hurtling toward this rational conclusion — acknowledgment of the deterrent nature of nuclear forces, development of a military strategy that no longer over-emphasizes their use and, finally, pursuit of real efforts to avoid any use of them.

GENERAL TAYLOR'S VISION

Soviet actions were clearly leading to a time when the US would no longer enjoy a monopoly in atomic weaponry; ultimately this would mean a situation of mutual deterrence. General Taylor takes the decision makers of the time to task for not having concluded, after the first Soviet atomic explosion, that mutual deterrence was inevitable and that nuclear weapons are "inapplicable" to limited conflict.³ However, he does acknowledge that eventually the force (yield) of nuclear devices could be engineered to be larger or smaller to fit the needs of the battlefield situation, thus making the use of tactical nuclear weapons technically feasible in limited wars.⁴ That is, he began to recognize that a nation could take a series of escalatory steps, moving from peace through crisis,

conventional war, limited nuclear war, to all-out massive retaliation. On the other hand, many now believe that even the use of a small, tactical nuclear device in most cases would inevitably lead to strategic nuclear war.⁵

General Taylor believed that certain "new factors" required that we reassess our defense strategy. These were: (1) the missile gap — loss of technological superiority over the Soviets; (2) our lack of a ballistic missile defense system; (3) our dwindling superiority in manned bombers; (4) the Soviets' drive to attain numerical superiority in intercontinental ballistic missile forces and to rely increasingly upon concealment, dispersion, and mobility;⁶ (5) our civilian population becoming increasingly vulnerable to catastrophic loss because we lack an effective civil defense capability (still true today); (6) the increasing likelihood of general war by mistake or miscalculation; and (7) the growing inferiority of our conventional forces.

General Taylor offers four "quick fixes" to the above factors. He asserts that, if these fixes were to be made in conjunction with a recasting of our long term actions, we could develop a "National Military Program of Flexible Response:"

- "1. Improved planning and training for limited war."⁷
2. Exploitation of the mobile Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile.⁸
3. Better protection for the Strategic Air Command.
4. A limited fall-out shelter program."⁹

For the most part, General Taylor was right in his statement of "A National Military Program." His approach was similar to the framework for military strategy currently used by the National War College.¹⁰ He laid out a clear statement of political objectives, which he labeled "the U.S. national security policy:"

"...to preserve the security of the U.S. and its fundamental values and institutions...to alter the international Communist movement to the end that it will no longer constitute a threat to the national security of the U.S. [It] must include national programs in political, diplomatic, military, economic, psychological, and cultural fields... Its central aim is the deterrence of Communist expansion in whatever form it may take."¹¹

And he notes the general agreement at the time that the order of probability of future military challenge was cold war, limited war, and general war.¹²

General Taylor did not provide much context for this statement of political objectives. He did not say what he believed the objectives of our allies were, although he clearly recognized the criticality of our collective commitments. I believe that we may *Others thought this way too, however, it may not be the case.* assume that he saw our allies' objectives as coincident with ours (as, for the most part, they were). Nor did he explicitly examine the political objectives of our adversaries, the Soviet Union and its allies in the Warsaw Pact and elsewhere. But Soviet objectives were implied by the phrase "Communist expansion," and Soviet allies were encompassed by the phrase "international Communist movement." Thus, I find no lack of understanding of the threat and its components in his thought processes.

His statement of the military objective is spelled-out as:

"...the maintenance of military strength which is capable of dealing with both general war and aggression under conditions short of general war...to prevent war if possible, limit war if it occurs, and successfully defeat any aggression..."¹³

Later in his book he adds a final objective:

"...and to make provision for essential survival measures in the unhappy event that general war is not deterred or comes through miscalculation."


7. The center of gravity was clearly Soviet hegemony. In military terms it was the Soviet and Warsaw Pact conventional and nuclear forces. It may be assumed that the objectives of the Warsaw Pact were the same as those of the Soviet Union. Similarly, NATO military objectives were the same ours. General Taylor made a clear statement of Soviet capabilities, including their capability to initiate general nuclear war, possibly with little or no warning. He presumed that such a surprise attack, however unlikely, would be for the purpose of keeping the US at bay while the Soviets would pursue other objectives in Europe and Asia.

He considered it more likely, especially as we approached an era of mutual deterrence, that the Soviets would engage in aggression short of general war. He believed it essential that the US prepare to deter limited aggression and to defeat it if deterrence should fail. Without this capability we would risk the possibility that limited aggression would escalate into general war, or that continued communist bloc expansion would erode the strength of the free world, leaving the US isolated and unable to deter or defeat future Soviet aggression.

Thus, our military vulnerabilities were clear, though not specifically stated as such: we did not have the capability to move sufficient forces, adequately equipped and trained, into world

trouble spots with sufficient speed to deter or turn back communist expansionism.

The perceived threat and our military vulnerabilities drove what General Taylor saw as our military requirements, which he summed-up in the following ten points:

- 
- "a. ...military technological superiority...
 - b. A deterrent, atomic delivery system capable of effective retaliation...
 - c. A continental defense system...to prevent...a crippling blow...
 - d. Adequate Army, Navy, and Air Force forces deployed abroad...backed by logistic support...
 - e. Ready forces...capable of intervening rapidly...[with] capability of employing atomic weapons...[and] logistical back-up...
 - f. Other ready forces...capable of rapidly reinforcing...[with appropriate] logistic arrangements...
 - g. Military and economic aid programs capable of developing indigenous strength and confidence...and of assisting in deterrence...
 - h. Reserve forces...capable of rapid mobilization...
 - i. Stockpiles of equipment...
 - j. A war production, mobilization and training base to support...general war."¹⁵

The heart of General Taylor's National Military Program was flexibility — the ability to apply military force rapidly, in any part of the world, and in any situation. This philosophy is consistent with my belief that a key to preparedness is scenario independence. I believe that the war we do not prepare for is the war we are likely to get. As it is not feasible to be fully prepared for all potential conflicts, it is prudent to be as "generic" as possible in developing plans and capabilities for military contingencies. That is, it is prudent to create

capabilities to accomplish military objectives not tied to specific scenarios, but applicable to a large range of scenarios.¹⁶

This leads to an inescapable conclusion that our fundamental political objective is deterrence of war, that nuclear force deters nuclear war (especially once mutual deterrence exists), but that nuclear force cannot deter conventional war. This being so, then there is a clear need for conventional capabilities to deal with the conventional threat. While the capabilities called for in General Taylor's National Military Program may have been over-ambitious, it is hard to deny the logic of his flexibility and mobility arguments. In perhaps the clearest, most straightforward language ever written on the logic of this argument, he states:

"In such a situation of nuclear parity, where both sides had the capability of destroying one another, there was no place for a policy of massive nuclear retaliation except as a deterrent to total nuclear war or as a reprisal if one began. This fact had become so apparent that it was doubtful whether either the Soviets or our allies believed that we would use our retaliatory power for anything other than to preserve our own existence."¹⁷

A PRESCRIPTION FOR THE ARMY

General Taylor saw a need for both a nuclear and conventional capability for the Army. His approach covered four major Army programs that needed attention, as outlined in Table 1. It was, for the most part, a very reasonable approach to achieving a balanced military capability.

Table 1
Army Programs Needing Upgrade

Army Program	What Needs to be Done (Annually)
Modernization	Modernize existing inventory (\$1.4 b); increase quantity in inventory for mobilization requirements (\$1.2 b); industrial mobilization & transportation (\$200 m). Total = \$2.8 b. Also, improve planning & strategic & tactical mobility.
Nike-Zeus missiles	Continue research & development at optimum rate. Fund initial production (no cost data provided) of enough Nike-Zeus, Nike-Hercules & Hawk batteries to protect the offensive retaliatory forces. Develop sophisticated early warning system.
Active/Reserve Personnel	Active Army of 925K; Reserve Components at paid drill strength of 700K. (FY 1960 budget strengths were 870K & 630K, respectively). Improve training. Make moderate increases in strength if forces deployed overseas.
Surface-to-air missiles	Fund at levels sufficient to meet goals established by Joint Chiefs of Staff against threat of manned bombers & air-to-surface missiles (no cost data provided). A few hundred reliable, accurate, mobile concealed & dispersed missiles.

But the troop strengths that he advocated were clearly too large to be supportable. The overall strength of our armed forces (2.5 million in 1959) and the size of the Army (nearly 900,000) would have been difficult to sustain into the 1960's. The new Flexible Response strategy for national security, initially advocated by the Army and later supported by the Navy and Marine Corps,¹⁸ would require maintenance of a credible and mobile conventional force with sizeable peacetime troop strengths. But it would not be possible to maintain a 2.5 million man standing force and to

Especially when you consider the probability of global war.

Difficult for leader to advocate reduction

modernize the conventional forces while continuing modernization and expansion of the nuclear forces. I believe that General Taylor should have accepted sizeable reductions in the troop strength of the Army, thereby avoiding the appearance that his interest in maintaining the conventional force was a parochial Army view. By this technique he possibly could have had preferable language inserted into the "Basic National Security Policy" statement, which in later years would have the potential for avoiding further disastrous cuts in the conventional force. This approach would have lost nothing, as cuts were inevitable so long as the Air Force was able to continue to prevail in the budget battles. In other words, the Army might have been able to trade troop strength for equipment modernization, shifting away from the meager level of ten percent of its resources going to such modernization.

General Taylor also advocated the Nike-Zeus antimissile missile program, on the basis that it was "...essential to the deterrence of atomic attack and to national survival if deterrence fails."¹⁹ This surprised me, in light of his prescience regarding mutual deterrence. However, perhaps he saw antimissile missiles as a necessary item in the tool kit of the military strategist — a step in the escalatory process from peace to all-out war. He seemed to understand the currently popular concept that deterrence consists of the ability to inflict unacceptable levels of loss on the enemy. If that is so, then it would seem to obviate the need for antiballistic missiles as further deterrent. Finally, the essentiality of the antimissile missiles for national survival should deterrence fail was suspect, at best. The inclusion of \$708 million in the

1960 budget for limited Nike-Zeus production would undoubtedly have turned out to be a drop in the bucket when compared with full system deployment. And its value as a defensive weapon was untried and unproven. There are those who argue today that mutual deterrence will remain effective only if we do not develop effective defenses [such as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)]. I do not agree with this argument. I believe that as we move to limit our strategic arms, we will have an increasingly greater need to be able to mitigate the consequences of a nuclear attack, perhaps by a reasonable mix of SDI capabilities, civil defense measures, and education about civil defense. | ?

Flexible response implies more than a broader menu of military options from which to choose. It should include the full arsenal of political actions including diplomacy, economic assistance, trade negotiations, arms reductions, and the like. General Taylor was right in acknowledging this, even in a work whose emphasis is on military strategy.

General Taylor makes a systemic indictment of the budget development process in his discussion of the 1960 Defense budget:

"With the Chiefs [of Staff] out of the picture, the budget was put together in the usual way, each service producing its budget in isolation from the others...at no time to my knowledge were the three service budgets put side by side and an appraisal made of the fighting capabilities of the aggregate military forces supported by the budget. This...approach [results in] the inability thus far to develop a budget which keeps fiscal emphasis in phase with military priorities."²⁰

It is a clear case of not having a coherent strategic plan and of not looking carefully enough at means versus ends.

Some military strategists believe that equality of force is inherently de-stabilizing. For conventional conflict, at least, they do not believe in deliberately engaging in a fair fight. Rather, superiority of force is viewed as a decisive factor. But in the case of nuclear deterrence, considerably less than overwhelming force, perhaps even less than parity, may be sufficient. General Taylor clearly understood this:

"We must provide for a striking force which is clearly capable of surviving a surprise attack and of inflicting unacceptable losses on the USSR...targets amount only to a few score, at the most to a few hundred. Even after adding a heavy factor of safety to cover imponderables, the size of the required atomic retaliatory force will be found to be much smaller than the bombers and missiles of our present force."

General Taylor's prescription for how the budget should be built based on comparative force structures and costs is a good one. It would give the Secretary of Defense a way of understanding means and ends and arriving at a logical defense budget.

CONCLUSION

"The Uncertain Trumpet" is a remarkably clear military strategy. In retrospect, its vision was almost 20-20. But it was flawed in several respects. It assumed the need for a standing Army in ~~X~~ peacetime that we simply could not afford. It over-emphasized the need for a defensive missile system; as we have seen, the absence of such a system has not caused deterrence to fail. And, because it fought the inevitability of Army force reductions, it missed an opportunity to make an indelible statement about the need for a continuously modernized conventional force — a statement that might have helped even in today's policy debates over the so-called peace dividend.

END NOTES

1. Maxwell D. Taylor, "The Uncertain Trumpet," Harper and Brothers, New York, 1960, pp. 23-79, 130-164.
2. Perhaps the lesson is that we should never forget the view of the people, as Clausewitz's Trinity demonstrated.
3. "It is curious that the possibility and implications of mutual deterrence had not affected defense thinking sooner [than 1953], since the first Soviet nuclear explosion preceded the Korean war by nearly a year. But...our leaders had ignored...the political disadvantages of large-yield nuclear weapons and the obvious fact that they are inapplicable to lesser conflicts," *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.
4. Taylor acknowledges that in 1957 Secretary of State John Foster Dulles did foresee this possibility: "Recent tests point to the possibility of possessing nuclear weapons the destructiveness and radiation effects of which can be confined substantially to predetermined targets." From "Challenge and Response in United States Policy," Foreign Affairs, October 1957, as quoted in Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
5. Nuclear terrorism may be the only instance in which hostile use of a nuclear device might be containable (i.e., might not lead to strategic nuclear war), and then only with very prudent response by the injured nation. The act would have to be very quickly recognized for what it is, and the perpetrator(s) would have to be immediately neutralized.
6. Thereby rendering us incapable of eliminating the danger militarily — "our security against general atomic war can rest only upon deterrence;" Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
7. We have improved our planning and training for limited war; this has led to development of the various OPLANs for war in specific theaters.
8. The Jupiter Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile was surely a precursor to the rail-based mobile MX "peacekeeper" missile system.
9. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
10. Framework for Military Strategy, Syllabus for "United States Defense Policy and Military Strategy," National War College, Washington, DC, March 1990, pp. 8-9.
11. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-1.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-4.

16. Similar logic is used in our civil defense program — we build capabilities that are applicable across the spectrum of emergencies. This is permitted and encouraged by the Civil Defense Act of 1950, so long as the capabilities are also applicable to population protection in nuclear war.

17. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

18. "...by the spring of 1958, the Navy and Marine Corps were ready to join in recommending changes that would take into account the implications of nuclear parity, establish finite limits on the size for atomic retaliatory force, and in general make for a flexible strategy for coping with limited aggression. This new position included recognition of the need to be able to fight limited war with or without the use of nuclear weapons." *Ibid.*, p. 58.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

21. Taylor was wrong when he said that "A B-52 bomber...[is] good for use in general war and little else." And he may have been equally wrong in saying that "An Army division or a tactical air squadron has a use in any kind of war." *Ibid.*, p. 148.